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ABSTRACT

Focusing on talk as the vehicle through which the reading and writing processes can become more interactive and can more closely approach the processes of learning, the lessons presented in this booklet provide examples of how teachers can construct learning strategies to help children "talk their way into meaning" against a framework of the writing process. These strategies let the teacher concentrate on helping children develop specific writing abilities while allowing them to retain control of their own writing. Each lesson includes focus, classroom setting, method, outcomes, relevance to language learning, and modifications after trialling. Lessons cover the following areas: (1) writing style, (2) choosing a topic, (3) cohesion, (4) sense of story, (5) revising, and (6) narration. In each case, the lessons aim to help children learn how to learn through the use of talk in the writing process. (JD)

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Talking Your Way Into Meaning:
Developing Specific Writing Abilities through Talk

Reading Around Series No. 4

Geoff Bull

Australian Reading Association

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TALKING YOUR WAY INTO MEANING: developing specific writing abilities through talk

Geoff Bull, D.D.I.A.E.

As we learn more about the writing process, it becomes harder to separate the various modes of language. More and more it seems that writing, reading and talking need to be combined to form a unified way of learning to construct and reconstruct meaning. In this way the writing process in its best form becomes a learning process, a process of learning how to learn.

To this end a number of lessons have been designed, trialled with children, and modified. These lessons attempt to provide examples of how teachers can construct learning strategies which focus on children talking their way into meaning against a framework of the writing process. These strategies reported in Bull and Anstey (1985) and Anstey and Bull (1986) have been developed within a structure which allows the teacher to concentrate on developing specific writing abilities in children whilst allowing the children to retain control of their own writing. The basic premise is that children best learn in a classroom environment where both teacher and pupil have their part to play rather than where the teacher has stepped back from the teaching role. This stepping back in order that the children might gain control of their writing often leads to aimless repetition by the child in the writing process. This tendency for teachers to drop out of the teaching role has been referred to by Graves (1983 1984) and was also the subject of a paper presented by Martin at the Perth ARA Conference. (1986)

The lesson outlines have all been given the same format for ease of reading. Some examples of children's responses to the lessons are included. The headings are as follows:

a. Focus
b. Classroom setting
c. Method
d. Outcomes
e. Relevance to language learning
f. Modifications after trialling

When looking at the lessons it is important to keep in mind that while the focus changes covering the following areas:

- writing style
- choosing a topic
- cohesion
- sense of story
- revising
- narration

In each case the aim of the lesson is that the children should be learning how to learn through using talk in the writing process.

1. WRITING STYLE

a. Focus

The focus in this lesson is to assist children to develop their own writing style. Some children have a tendency to copy the writing of others too often because they have not developed a recognisable personal way of writing. Once children begin to develop this voice in their writing they often become more committed to their own writing.

b. Classroom Setting

Children can be in groups of 4, 5 or 6. Size of group can be increased as the age of the writer increases. Groups can be interest, ability, friendship or cross-age. This technique has been tried with writers from Year 3 to adult.

c. Method

This is a variation in the 'Pass the Parcel' game often played at parties. Each member of the group is given a sheet of paper with a different sentence on the top. Writers are instructed to add their own sentence and then pass the paper around the group. This is repeated until all the sheets have gone right round the group. With children who are older or more practised the size of the group can be increased or the number of times the paper goes around the group can be increased. With younger children a practice session may need to be held.

d. Outcomes

Children may learn a range of things in this task.

- Children begin to realise that the sentence they add can make it harder or easier for the next writer who is their audience. This is reinforced each time they get their next sentence (from the writer) while they add to and pass on (to the reader).
- Particular sentences will begin to become identified with particular writers due to their individual style.
- Much talk goes on about clarifying, extending, explaining and criticising the writing. Using talk to get at the meaning of the writing is as important as the writing and responding which is going on.

e. Relevance to language learning

- There is a gain in knowledge about audience and style.
- Children begin to think of the author-writer-reader link.
- Links can be made by the teacher between reading, writing and talking in planning coverage of the curriculum.
- By varying the initial sentences other genres and other content areas can be introduced.

f. Modification

- Mixed ability and mixed aged groups seem to produce

the best results not only in quality of writing but even with such things as reading each others handwriting.

- Interesting results were obtained when the initial sentence was expository rather than narrative. Some groups maintained the form - others changed it back to narrative.
- This technique was found to be a great ice breaker for writers who were unused to writing, who disliked writing or who did not know one another.
- A variation can be introduced by giving a group a 5-6 sentence paragraph and asking them to add another sentence somewhere. Class has to identify the added sentence and tell how they knew.

2. CHOOSING A TOPIC

a. Focus

To assist children in choosing a topic. All children will have trouble choosing a topic at least some of the time. It can be a continual problem for some children, particularly those who are just starting out in the writing process and have little confidence in their own ability.

b. Classroom Setting

Individual and pairs suitable for Year 4 on. Time allowed - 60 minutes. (It may need to be broken into two sessions for younger children.)

c. Method

This technique is known as the 'Five card trick' and has been used by many teachers in the last five years.

Each child is given five index cards. The 15 cm x 10 cm ones are quite large enough. Children are asked to number them and put their names on each card.

Card 1 Write down four things which have happened to you lately. Discuss this list with your partner, then choose one as a topic.

Card 2 Write a quick working title. Brainstorm words/phrases/thought/feelings about topic. Circle all those you like. Discuss with partner.

Card 3 Using card 2 write for 5 minutes using circled ideas. Discuss with partner.

Card 4 Begin to revise using partner as audience. Write two other leads for topic. Discuss with partner.

Card 5 Reread cards, 2, 3, 4. On Card 5 write chosen topic with chosen lead. Write new draft polishing writing as you go. Time to proof read - use partner. Discuss each others writing.

d. Outcomes

- Children are given a structured way of devising a topic.
- Techniques of modification of topic are illustrated. (Some children believe once they have chosen a topic they are committed.)
- Paired learning is introduced.

e. Relevance to language learning

- Teaches choosing a topic.
- Responding is introduced.
- Concept of different leads for a story is introduced.
- Often leads to expository writing and research because Card 1 reflects personal interests.
- A great way of introducing writing in other content areas.
- Writers use talk to revise, rehearse, rewrite their piece.

f. Modification

- As suggested before, time was a concern. A break can be made after Card 3 or 4 and the lesson continued in another session.
- Lesson turned out to be more successful (and less difficult) than had been anticipated. Children of all ages responded well to the greater response received *while* writing not *after* writing.
- Many children expressed relief at being given assistance with choosing a topic and the recognition that it was sometimes very difficult.

3. COHESION

a. Focus

To write a narrative which has a coherent story line. Children need to focus on a logical flow in their writing. Getting events in a logical sequence with each sentence being related to the preceding and following sentence is an element of good writing.

b. Classroom Setting

Lesson starts out with whole class. Moves to paired learning and concludes with group work suitable for Year 3 up. Time allowed 60 minutes.

c. Method

As a whole class compose a story on the board. Each child is allowed to add just one sentence scribed by teacher. This continues until class decides story is completed. Children are given following criteria to evaluate writing.

- Is it just one story which fits together?
- Are there any sentences or ideas which don't fit it?
- If someone else reads it, could they tell it was written by two people? If so, how?

Children then move into pairs. One child writes a sentence, the second adds a sentence. Turns are taken till story is finished. Three criteria (above) are used again. Children move into groups of four and repeat steps.

d. Outcomes

- Children focus on sequencing and logical order.
- A beginning is made at judging coherence in writing.
- Children begin to look critically at their own, and others, writing.
- Gain experience in negotiating text and responding in class, group and paired learning.

e. Relevance to language learning

- In literature, this technique is very useful to focus children's attention on writing which rambles and contains inconsistencies.
- Useful as a technique for evaluating writing in any content area. Children can then judge good writing in social studies or science particularly.

f. Modification

- It was found that in the paired learning and group situation the initial sentence had to be supplied by the teacher.
- Time was needed for children to discuss the difference between paired writing and group writing.

4. SENSE OF STORY

a. Focus

To construct a story with a particular moral in mind. Understanding the relationship between story and moral requires selection of topic, point of view and relevant material in order to take a particular perspective. All of these form important background knowledge and experience in the development of sense of story.

b. Classroom Setting

Lesson begins as a whole class, changes to paired learning and then returns to whole class. It is suitable for Year 3 up and requires 60 minutes.

c. Method

The whole class discusses what the characteristics of a story are, then listen while a short story is read to them. (Fables or myths and legends are useful here because they are short and simple in construction.) Further discussion takes place about what the story told (plot) and what the story meant (moral). Class then composes a class story to a given moral. Children are then paired and given a moral for which they have to write a story. When all stories are complete they are read out and class has to guess what the moral is.

d. Outcomes

- Children begin to see relationship of a good story to features of story construction. (Discussion of unsuccessful/successful stories help with this. Morals that are too difficult to identify or too soon revealed also assist in this.)
- Whole story is based around a main idea to which all ideas have to be related.
- Use of argument is necessary.
- Listening and speaking skills are an important feature and are tightly connected to comprehension.
- The relationship of writing and literature is drawn.

e. Relevance to language learning

- Introduces concept of theme, plot, characters in literature.
- In science can be used to look at fact-theory-opinion continuum.
- Support, argument evidence can be introduced through social studies (particularly with myths and legends).
- Specific types of talk are introduced, e.g. argument.

f. Modification

- Discussions at beginning were critically important. A story written by a child was introduced to focus on what makes a *good* story.
- Some children still had trouble writing story from a given moral. The number of morals was reduced and written on board. Children chose which one they wanted. This made identification of moral easier.

5. REVISING

a. Focus

To introduce both the concept and the need for revision. Revising is a concept many children have difficulty with and the changes they make to their written work are often unnecessary. They therefore should be shown when revision is actually needed.

b. Classroom Setting

Lesson begins as a whole class and then moves to paired learning. It is suitable for Year 2 upwards and takes 60 minutes.

Draw a square ~~about~~ with a 10 cm ~~long~~ side ~~then draw a square~~ in the middle of the page ~~For~~ Then draw a square ~~5cm~~ 2cm ~~down draco the square~~ about 5cm on the edge ~~ege~~ of the pag. ~~Then~~ 1cm away and ~~draw~~ a medeam ium circle curcle. Then draw a square away 1cm do the square 5cm then do a square the same as the other curcle then do a triangel the to long side 3cm the small line 2cm then a smtll square 1cm. then do a line 4cm in the center.

Draw a square with a 10cm side in the middle of the page. Then draw a smaller square with a 2cm side, draw the smaller squre 2 and half cm from the top of the Bigger square. Now draw a circle 1cm away from the Square draw a small circle, Then draw a nother square 2cm side draw the square 1cm away from the circle, Then draw a nother small circle 1cm away from the square The draw a triangle the two long side 2 and a half cm and the little one 2cm draw the triangle 1cm away from the circle then draw a 1cm square and draw the square 1cm away.

c. *Method*

Teacher has a series of instructions already on board which tells how to draw a simple house. Children as a class follow instructions and draw house. Teacher then reveals a drawing of a house which has been kept hidden. This drawing is supposed to be identical to the one the class has just drawn. (The instructions given by the teacher are purposely misleading so that the class drawings and model drawing are quite different.) Children help teacher revise instructions so that a drawing can be made which is the same as the one the teacher did. The teacher follows revision suggestions and draws house)going wrong wherever possible to illustrate need for revision). Children are then divided into pairs. They each make a simple drawing and then write a set of instructions which they swap with their partner. The partner draws from the instructions and the two drawings are compared. The partners then work together to revise instructions till they are accurate and if followed will lead to the two drawings being similar.

d. *Outcomes*

- Children see the need for revision.
- Writing specific instructions becomes critical.
- Following instructions becomes necessary.
- A different form of writing (instructions) is introduced.
- Vocabulary development is enhanced.

e. *Relevance to language learning*

- Useful to introducing descriptive writing particularly adjectives and adverbs.
- Can be used in mathematics for introducing geometric shapes.
- In social studies, map making can be developed this way.
- Talk is used in a meaningful way in the revising process.
- Children talk their way into meaning.

f. *Modifications*

- Younger children need to have their drawings checked because they often make them too difficult.
- When children are at the point of revising their instructions the teacher must be freely available. Some pairs will 'blame' each other - he drew it wrongly - she wrote the instructions wrongly.
- Some children who are good revisers will take over control of their partner's writing. Very clear instructions are needed to avoid this.

6. NARRATION

a. *Focus*

To write a narrative from a different point of view. This introduced children to changing the nature of a story to fit in with a different perspective. It encourages children to think of writing from several viewpoints. This enhances their concept of the relationship between writer and reader.

b. *Classroom Setting*

Whole class followed by groups of 3-4. Suitable for Year 3 upward and will take 60 minutes.

c. *Method*

Discuss a well known story which is written from one character's viewpoint (e.g. *Little Red Riding Hood*) and ask class to consider the story from the wolf's position. (A very useful book here is *Jim and the Beanstalk* by Raymond Briggs where a well known story has already been rewritten from the giant's point of view. This can be used as an introduction.) Children are then assigned a well known story in groups of 3 or 4 and asked to rewrite them. It is useful to assign children particular roles within the group, e.g.

scriber	the child who actually does the handwriting
decider	the child who makes decisions if a choice has to be made
idea person(s)	group member(s) who make suggestions.

New story is then read to the class who discuss its effectiveness as to whether it is successful.

d. *Outcomes*

- Children get practice in writing narrative from a particular point of view.
- This activity also incorporates elements of writing style.
- Could be used to introduce writing of plays.

e. *Relevance to language learning*

- In literature viewpoint can be changed but so can characterisation, plot, setting, etc. Whichever is chosen can be the focus of learning.
- Children learn role playing and group interaction.
- Particular happenings in Social Studies, especially historical, can be studied in this way using the processes and skills of language learning.

f. *Modifications*

No modifications were found to be necessary. Children seemed to find a great deal of enjoyment in this task and usually took great delight in rewriting well known stories of their own choice.

SUMMARY

The purpose of these lessons has been to draw the reading, writing, listening and speaking modes of language together through the use of talk. Talk is the vehicle which can make the reading and writing processes become interactive and more closely approach processes of learning. Where the processes of learning become interactive (i.e. between teacher and learner and learner and learner) the task or focus is more meaningful and more important to all parties involved - everyone has something invested in the learning.

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